

# Bhakti Vriksha- ISKCON Kolkata

## Brief History

From 1976 to 2001, there was not much focus on congregational preaching. Earlier, the temple was conducted under the 'Ritvik System' for some time which was followed by Mayapur authorities taking over the temple. Operations started from the year 2001 with H.G Dayaram Prabhu as the Temple President with focus towards Donor Cultivation and Life Member Programs. From 2001 to 2002, all efforts to start congregational preaching went in vain. It was then that H.G Asraya Gauranga Prabhu came across the Bhakti Vriksha (BV) Manual which was inspired by H.H Jayapataka Swami Maharaj. This manual gave guidelines on how to start a BV, its structure and other details. What started off with 4 BV groups, gradually grew to 10 groups in a short time. At present, there are around 3000 congregational devotees connected with ISKCON Kolkata.

## Structure

- At the bottom level, there are BV groups having 15-20 members and 1 'Servant Leader' who takes class.
- Consortium of 3-4 groups is called a Sector having a Sector Servant as its in-charge.
- 3-4 Sectors form a Circle. Circles are set-up location wise. At present there are 14 Circles in Kolkata.
- Supervising preachers are generally temple brahmacharis. They can also be congregational preachers.
- Above the Circle is BV Director.

## How to Start

- Main target for starting new BVs is the Rathayatra festival. Over 2 Lakh people attend the festival across 9 days. A large BV Stall is set-up attracting 5000-10000 people daily. Quiz contests and other activities are arranged for them. In this way, contacts are built.
- Around 1500 people are registered through this system. They are then divided area-wise. In each area, a one-time program named 'Jeevan Jigyasa' is conducted inviting around 200 people, with the aim of getting them registered for the BV weekly class.
- At the end of the one-time program, interested candidates are registered for the 10-week Shraddhavan Course. Of the total number of people registered, around 30% of them remain by the end of the year. In this way, 10-15 new BVs are started every year through Rathayatra.
- Another method is to do local preaching. Devotees go to residential colonies and do door to door preaching, talking about BV and asking them to get registered. The colony's community hall is also used for this purpose.

## Different Stages of Bhakti Vriksha

- At the entry level is the Shraddhavan Course. It is for beginners and the motive is to make them chant atleast 1 round everyday and attend weekly BV class. A module, consisting of 10 lessons, is produced for each level of BV in Kolkata and it has the following 6 steps:
  - ✓ Ice-breaker
  - ✓ Kirtan
  - ✓ Japa/ Mantra Meditation
  - ✓ Discussion

- ✓ Preaching Session
- ✓ Prasadam
- At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Level is Krishna Sevak. It consists of 12 lessons and the same 6 steps. At this level, students are required to chant 4 rounds everyday and refrain from meat eating.
- At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Level is Krishna Sadhak consisting of 12 lessons and same 6 steps. Students are required to chant 8 rounds everyday and follow the 4 regulative principles. Little leeway about tea, coffee, onion and garlic is given.
- 4<sup>th</sup> Level is Srila Prabhupada Ashraya where students have to chant 16 rounds everyday and strictly follow the 4 regulative principles.
- At the 5<sup>th</sup> Level- Guru Charan Ashraya, apart from 16 rounds and 4 regulative principles, some guidelines about the ISKCON Guru System is given. They select Guru at this stage and are eligible to go for initiation after 1 year.
- After the BV Course is complete, devotees can attend common Gita Study Class. Senior devotees take this class. Entire BV Course spans about 72 weeks, but takes usually 2-3 years to complete, at the end of which devotees are prepared to go for initiation.

### Training For Leaders

- BV Leaders are trained through weekly class, which is conducted locally. Vaishnav etiquettes, vaishnav songs, Bhakti Shastri books, Bhagavad Gita, Upadeshamrita, lessons from Srimad Bhagavatam are some of the topics covered in this class.
- Leaders are trained as to how to conduct BV class. Throughout the year various seminars are held, which is centrally conducted for all the leaders. Some of the topics covered are Nectar of Instruction, importance of Sharnagati, Brahma Samhita, etc.
- Seminars on Grihastha Life and Deity Worship are also held. Leaders are taken for a retreat camp once a year.

### Unique Features

- We have published our own BV Module consisting of guidelines for leaders, introduction to festivals, history of Srila Prabhupada, etc.
- Congregational devotees are well connected to the temple.
- Bhoga cooking for deities on all days is done by BV devotees. Different groups of devotees come and cook for the deities and also make garlands.
- Devotees also financially help the temple, contributing close to Rs. 60 Lakhs a year.

### Management Structure

- Congregational Development Council {CDC} consists of 5 Brahmacharis and 1 congregational devotee.
- CDC looks after the entire congregational preaching management, consisting of 15 Brahmacharis and 150 congregational devotees who undertake preaching activities.
- Above the CDC is Core Director who takes care of temple management and BV.

### Other Notable Features

- During BV Classes, a children's program is also conducted to keep children engaged named 'Vrinda Garden'. 4 modules have already been prepared. It includes activities like crafts, songs, drawing, painting, etc. It is a 1 year course. A plan is in place to prepare the entire set of modules.

- ISKCON Kolkata Education Services is the board, under whose supervision courses like Bhakti Shastri and Bhakti Vaibhav are conducted.
- From 2005-2007, Bhakti Shastri course was conducted for Brahmacharis. From 2007-2008, 40 congregational devotees completed Bhakti Shastri. There were sessions in English, Hindi and Bengali.
- From 2014-2016, Bhakti Shastri was conducted in 5 batches in which approx. 100 BV leaders took up the course.